No Greater Love
May 29, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 116:1–15
Acts 7:54–8:3
John 15:12–17

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
John 15:13 (NRSV)

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones."
Psalm 116:15 (NRSV)

Who stands fast? Only the one who is ready to sacrifice all when called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible one who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Your love is reflected in every expression of human love, O God. So today we remember in gratitude those whose love gave life to us and to our nation and to our church. Open our hearts and minds this morning to expressions of that love all around us, through Jesus Christ, who gave his life, in love, for his friends and for us and for all people. Amen.

A full-page article in the news section of the *Christian Century* caught my eye. In the middle of the page were four grainy black-and-white snapshots: three men in Roman collars—Catholic priests—and one man in a suit and tie—a Lutheran pastor. They were friends, each of them serving a parish, in the northern German city of Lübeck in the 1940s. Each of them, separately, harbored deep and growing reservations about Nazism and the rabid anti-Semitism and militarism of the Third Reich. They found one another at a local funeral and soon discovered their mutual concerns. Encouraged by one another, they began to criticize the regime, at first in private conversation, but then more publicly. They distributed pamphlets critical of the Nazis. They were arrested, accused of treason, and on November 10, 1943, executed, one by one. Their courage and their friendship inspired an

unusual—for the day—spirit of ecumenism and friendship between Catholics and Lutherans in Lübeck that was extraordinary. The news article was about the Vatican's recent decision to beatify the three priests but not the Lutheran. But what caught my attention—as it always does—is the reminder that in the not-too-distant past, Christians, in this case Christian clergy, men like me who loved their church and loved their nation and loved God, paid for their faith with their lives.

Thousands of clergy were killed by the Nazis in addition to millions of others; thousands and thousands of Orthodox priests, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers were executed by the Soviets under Joseph Stalin. More were silenced, jailed, tortured, and killed by Eastern European Communist regimes during the Cold War. Fidel Castro jailed dissident clergy. People continue to die for their faith: last November Islamic militants seized an Iraqi Catholic church in Baghdad, shot the priest while he was saying mass, threw grenades, and fired into the congregation. Fifty-eight Christians died. There is so much fear of religious persecution in Iraq that Christians are fleeing to Syria and Jordan, and the Christian presence in Iraq, which was always small but robust and healthy, is a fraction of what it used to be.

Every time it happens I am reminded that this faith of mine, which I am free to express openly in whatever way I choose and which makes so few actual demands of me, is very costly and very precious, because people have died and continue to die for it.

The story begins, at the beginning, in the first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament book the Acts of the Apostle is our first and earliest history book. It tells the story of how a tiny group of followers who had gathered around Jesus of Nazareth, after his crucifixion and because they experienced his resurrection, not only held on to one another, but began to tell the story, share the news, and before even they knew it, they had a movement on their hands. There was no church yet. They weren't calling themselves Christians yet. They were Jews, one and all, and they believed the ancient Messianic promise had been fulfilled in Jesus, whom they were now calling Christ, God's anointed one. There is a sensitive topic emerging here: modern Christians are inclined to overlook it or not dwell on it because of the shameful reality of Christian anti-Semitism, but the reality is that the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem didn't know what to make of Jesus' followers. Jesus was a Jew. So were his followers, all of them. They had no intention of not being Jews, but they were saying things that made the traditionalists uneasy. So there was conflict, and it became bitter as the Jesus people realized that not everyone was buying into their new idea and as the Jewish establishment began to realize that the new movement was really something new and different.

The result, and it would take several decades, would be a break—between Jews and Christians, betweens synagogue and church. Part of the result was that the Jewish Christians, the first church, faced their own first major conflict when more and more Gentiles became interested in the movement. We'll get to that in a few weeks. For now, at the very beginning, a Jewish follower of Jesus with a Greek name, one of seven men who were chosen by the community to see that the widows in the community had enough food, has begun to talk publicly about Jesus and finds himself arrested and on trial. His name is Stephen, and the charge against him sounds familiar: he's destroying tradition, undermining the very foundation of society. When he's questioned, Stephen launches into the longest single speech in the New Testament. And it is so inflammatory that the crowd listening to the proceedings becomes an angry lynch mob, and they haul Stephen outside the city gates and stone him to death. As he dies, Stephen prays an ancient Jewish bedtime prayer—"Lord, receive my spirit"—and as his Lord did a few years before, Stephen forgives his persecutors. The first Christian martyr.

It's a difficult topic for us, because Christian anti-Semitism, Christian persecution of Jews, has been a thousand times worse down through history, right up into the present. But if you don't understand that there was conflict between Jews who were followers of Jesus and traditional Jews, that the Christians were a small minority and, for a time, were persecuted by the majority, much of the New Testament is indecipherable. Jews persecuted Jewish Christians for a few years, and it is no exaggeration to say that Christians have been persecuting, discriminating against, euthanizing Jews ever since.

One of my favorite thinkers is Rabbi Irving Greenberg, professor, philosopher, and theologian, who says that, like any family feud, this one has been bitter. But we are still family, we Christians and Jews; we ought to be proud of one another. Christians ought to be proud of Judaism for holding onto the faith, the tradition, the law, and never letting go and grateful because our faith was born in the womb of Judaism.

And Jews should be proud of Christians, Rabbi Greenberg says, like an older brother is proud of a younger brother, for taking essentially Jewish ideas into all the world, across every barrier of race and nation. I'd like to think that a little bit of this is finally happening, after 2,000 sometimes painfully tragic years, in places like this one with our important friendship and partnership with our neighbors at Chicago Sinai.

Back to the story. Uneasiness became suspicion became hostility. Jesus' followers were driven from their synagogues and communities during the middle of the first century C.E. and in several decades became a new thing altogether, a community based on faith in Jesus as the Christ, bound to one another in part by the danger of by being identified as Christians, meeting

together in one another's homes and telling the story of Jesus, and planting little communities of believers throughout the entire region and westward to Greece and Rome itself.

But the story of persecution continued. Jewish opposition and persecution soon stopped, but then Rome became concerned about the growing Christian presence in the cities and towns of the empire—even the capital city itself. There were ten distinct Roman persecutions of the church in which Christians suffered in every way imaginable, from social and economic discrimination to imprisonment and death. It ended finally in 313 when Emperor Constantine brought it to a halt and declared that Christians were free to practice their faith.

It was not the end of martyrdom, however. Christians continued to die at the hands of barbarian tribes. And after the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants continued cheerfully to behead and burn each other at the stake. I attended a meeting one time on the campus of Oberlin College and on a walk around the campus, discovered a handsome stone arch. The plaque told me it was a memorial to Oberlin College graduates, Congregational missionaries, killed in the Boxer Rebellion in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a recent essay, Jason Byassee observes that martyrdom is almost always complex and must always be understood in its social and political context. Christian missionaries in nineteenth-century China were regarded as conspicuous foreigners and enemies of Chinese culture. A lot of non-Chinese died in the Boxer rebellion, many Christian missionaries, because they were so conspicuous. The Oberlin arch lists the names of thirteen men and women, Oberlin graduates, and five of their children who were killed. I stood for a while pondering the missionaries, their wives, and those five children.

I cannot help but experience both humility and gratitude as I think about them, and I'm glad for the reminder that this faith of ours is a very costly thing, made more precious by the lives and deaths of those Christians who sacrificed all. It is good to be reminded in this wonderfully free country, where all religions are protected and welcomed and where no one need die for his or her faith, that it has not been so for much of our history. It is good to be reminded that though our religious commitments demand very little of you and me, there have been and are those who were willing to lay it all on the line. It is good to be reminded that there are things worth dying for.

The most engaging book I've read in a long time is *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand. It is the story of Louis Zambrini, an Olympic distance runner caught up in World War II, a bombardier on a B-26 that crashed into the Pacific Ocean, survived with a companion forty-seven days on a raft and then two years in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, subjected to horrendous

deprivation and torture. This story is not only a great adventure but also a reminder of the cost paid by Americans in service to our country.

My experience is similar to that of Tom Brokaw's, which he described in his book *The Greatest Generation*. People our age grew up as children during the war, high school during the Korean War, college, graduate school, marriage, family, and career before Vietnam—the only age group in that most violent century in history not to have been asked to put life on the line and therefore extremely humbled and grateful for those who did and still do. And so I continue to honor them and remember them, among them my own uncles and cousins. On a visit to Washington, D.C., not long ago, I visited, for the first time, the stunning World War II Memorial, with each state represented and each major battle, and was moved. I ran my hand across the inscriptions: Saipan, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Normandy, the Bulge, Northern France, Italy—engagements where members of my family fought and were wounded and died.

Memorial Day is not only the official beginning of the summer season, with beaches and swimming pools and parks open, it is a day set aside to remember.

Four-hundred-and-twenty-five members of this congregation were in uniform during World War II. A special committee was formed to keep track of each one, write letters, send news and gift parcels and assurance of love and prayers. The committee kept an Honor Roll, in three big notebooks, each page devoted to an individual Fourth Church service member, with pictures and information. We got them out of the archives for you to see this morning. My favorite snapshot is of Harrison Ray Anderson Jr. and John Anderson, U.S. Navy brothers home on leave, proudly shaking hands at the Garth fountain. Their father, Harrison Ray Anderson, was the pastor at the time. Harrison Ray Anderson Jr. (Lad) became a Presbyterian minister, lives in retirement in Bellingham, Washington, with his lovely wife, Lois, who, by the way, is still a member of the congregation.

The front pages of the books list the fifteen members who died, with today's text as the inscription: "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Jesus said that on the last night of his life. He was with his disciples and dearest friends; they were eating dinner together. He knew and they knew that the end had come. The opposition to him in Jerusalem had organized and now had momentum. There was no way out other than slipping out of the city under the cover of darkness that night. If he stayed, he was going to be arrested and executed. The very fact that he didn't escape, the fact that he sat there, calmly, bravely, with deep determination and commitment to what was happening, decided to be in charge of his own destiny, not a

hopeless victim, the fact that he chose to spend his last night on earth breaking bread and drinking wine with his best friends in the world, punctuates the drama and the importance of the occasion. So we listen carefully: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I have a new commandment for you: love one another as I have loved you.” And then—I see him pausing to look each one of them in the eye—“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

That is what he did, and he wanted them to know why he did it—because he loved them and he wanted them to know that God is love and that God loved them enough to lay down life for them; wanted them to live in that love, to live loving life and God and family and friends enough to die for them, to die for that love, to learn the lesson that until you love that deeply you are not fully, truly alive.

“God is love,” John will write elsewhere in a little letter, near the end of his own life. Not God is creator; not God is power; not God is a judge. God is love. It is the essence of God to act lovingly. And therefore, because each human being bears the image of God, it is the essence of humanity, of human beings, to love.

The late Donald MacLeod taught a generation of Presbyterian ministers as a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. He had a special interest in this congregation and stayed in touch with me until he died. Donald used to tell a story about a class he was teaching in the 1950s in which one of his students was a Chinese young man, a refugee who had fled China and his home and family because of religious persecution under the Communist regime. It was Donald’s custom in this class to ask one of the students to pray before he began his lecture. One day he asked the Chinese student, and the young man stunned everyone by praying, “O God, give us something to die for, for if we do not have something to die for, we have nothing for which to live.”

One who understood that and lived it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. You know his story: A German pastor, academic, pacifist. At the urging of his friends at Union Seminary in New York City, including Reinhold Neihbur, Bonhoeffer came to this country in the late 1930s to study and work and to escape Nazism. Earlier Bonhoeffer had written, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” He meant that metaphorically in 1933—that to be a Christian you need to give your life away in some way. But as Nazism tightened its grip on Germany, the words took on new meaning. Bonhoeffer decided he could not sit out from the safety of New York City whatever was going to happen to his nation. So he booked passage on the last ship sailing to Germany. When the German Christian church capitulated to the Nazis and became part of the government apparatus of the Third Reich, Bonhoeffer and others organized an underground church, the Confessing

Church of Germany, and helped write a confession of faith, the Barmen Confession, which is part of our Book of Confessions, directly critical of Nazism and affirming ultimate allegiance to no one, not the Fuhrer, not the party, not the state, no authority other than Jesus Christ. It is the very essence of every kind of totalitarianism to demand that ultimate allegiance for itself. Confessing Church ministers were arrested, jailed, tortured, executed. As the Nazis' grip tightened and as it became clear that extermination of entire Jewish populations was planned and beginning to happen, Bonhoeffer decided that his faithful, responsible duty was to participate in an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. The plot almost succeeded but ultimately failed; the conspirators were identified, arrested, and literally two weeks before the German surrender, Bonhoeffer was executed.

Years before, he had written, "Who stands fast? Only the one whose final standard is not reason, principle, conscience, freedom, virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all when called to obedient and faithful action in faith . . . in exclusive allegiance to God" (Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy,* p. 432).

"Precious in the sight of the Lord, is the death of his faithful ones," the psalmist wrote. And so I remember them today and find myself encouraged, lifted up, able to stand a little taller, and strengthened by their lives and their deaths. All the way back to Stephen and all those who have died down through the centuries. You and I are blessed and strengthened by them. And I remember martyrs who have inspired me and bolstered my courage and faith by their lives and deaths: Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero. And I remember all the members of this church who have gone before us and whose lives and faithfulness bless and strengthen us in our day.

And I remember all who have died in service to our country down across the years and who today still serve in harm's way and give the last measure of devotion.

They are precious in God's sight, and precious in our memory.

"No greater love has anyone than this," Jesus said, "to lay down one's life for one's friends,"

Amen.